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ABSTRACT

Over the last 15 years or so, a variety of culture-based composition pedagogies have claimed to prepare students to take their places as citizens in a postmodern world. Cultural studies pedagogies in particular, because they tend to be grounded in neo-Marxist critical theory traditions, claim to enact democratic principles by preparing students to critique structures of domination. This paper argues that the theoretical top-heaviness of cultural studies undercuts its potential for democratizing students and classrooms. The paper then proposes a different culture-based pedagogical theory, grounded in socialist anthropology, that shifts the concept of democratic education away from something students have to prepare for, towards something that is democratic while it is being done. It begins with an historical overview of early composition theory and research. It then discusses, as an example of a course which operates according to the sort of democratic principles which cultural studies means to get at but does not, a writing course which focuses on student-teacher relations and on writing practices that reflect and refract those relations. What the paper proposes is a course structured as an ethnographic site, and more specifically a course in which both students and the teacher engage in ethnographic writing practices. (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

The Writing Classroom as a Site of Grassroots Democratic Action

By Seth Kahn

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (91st, Baltimore, MD, November 15-20, 2001)

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The Writing Classroom as a Site of Grassroots Democratic Action

Over the last fifteen years or so, a variety of culture-based composition pedagogies have claimed to prepare students to take their places as citizens in a postmodern, post-Fordist world. Cultural studies pedagogies in particular, because they tend to be grounded in neo-Marxist critical theory traditions, claim to enact democratic principles by preparing students to critique structures of domination. I will argue that the theoretical top-heaviness of cultural studies undercuts its potential for democratizing students and classrooms; I will then propose a different culture-based pedagogical theory, grounded in socialist anthropology, that shifts the concept of democratic education away from something students have to prepare for, towards something that's democratic while we're doing it.

Let me start with just a bit of historical context. Early composition theory and research constructed writers as autonomous or individual. Research into what writers do when they write focused squarely on developing theoretically ideal (ahistorical, decontextualized) models of writers and ways to teach them. Towards the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, composition theorists began to critique the individualism and scientism of cognitive research. Patricia Bizzell and others (especially David Bartholomae) argued that cognitive theories of writing invoked a theory of language as transparent and of the writer as individual agent. Bizzell, along with David Bartholomae (in particular) started developing the notion of the academic discourse community, a language community that college students learn to enter in composition courses. By introducing to the field the notion that meanings are socially constructed (which also entails that language doesn't belong solely to students who write it), Bizzell and Bartholomae made a space to begin talking about writing, even the writing that first-

year students do, as social. But that concept of the social was still firmly bounded within the academy.

The Cultural Turn in Composition Studies

The turn to more explicitly culture-based writing happened when cultural studies theory came to Composition Studies in the mid-1980s, largely as a response to the conservative political climate of the Reagan-Thatcher era. In the first published description of this particular political turn in the field, John Trimbur claims that some compositionists turned to cultural studies as a way of re-asserting left politics in the academy, perhaps in response to conditions that allowed for the popularity of texts like Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1987). The turn to cultural studies theory allows Composition Studies to engage in "a project to recover the historical agency of the dispossessed, as a step away from the academic reproduction of scholarship and careers and toward a re-representation of reading and writing as potential subversive and liberatory activities" (11). The cultural turn enables writers to see their writing as political within a broad variety of institutional and social contexts that extend beyond the classroom and the academy (although not to the exclusion of the classroom and the academy). In other words, our understanding of composing needs to account not only for what happens when writers put words on paper, but for the historical forces that determine those words, the social forces that constrain and/or enable their distribution, and the social implications of their consumption.¹

More broadly, the question of what happens when writers write engages a complex set of historical and social forces that come to bear on what had been reduced largely to modernist

¹ Trimbur cites Richard Johnson's mapping of cultural studies, "What Is Cultural Studies, Anyway" (1986-1987) for this attention to all aspects of the movement of a text. Johnson argues at length that the work of cultural studies, for some years, had emphasized particular moments of the production-distribution-consumption cycle to the exclusion of the others, an error that distorts the possibilities for understanding any moment in depth.

conceptions of individualism. Arguing that this emphasis on individualism is a product of capitalist ideological domination, James Berlin, in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” suggests that critical analysis of ideological apparatuses (and of our participation in them as social formations) is at the heart of a refigured rhetoric curriculum. Invoking Therborn’s conception of ideology, Berlin argues that the central task of writing instruction is to help students resist dominant discourses by becoming aware of their own interpellations within multiple and sometimes contrary structures. When writers write, then, they are negotiating their subject-positions within prestructured discourses (which resonates in an interesting way with Bartholomae’s claim in “Inventing the University” that the goal of writing instruction is to teach students to work “within and against the discourses” of the academy).

Although notions of writing both as politically/culturally situated and as politically/culturally constitutive that circulate through the work of Trimbur, Berlin, John Schilb, Bruce McComiskey and others are appealing to me, I’m troubled by the ways that students are positioned as writers while they’re members of writing classes. Berlin, Schilb, Trimbur, and McComiskey (along with Giroux and others) all construct the classroom as a place where students don’t necessarily **do** political/cultural work, but instead **learn to do** that work. The classroom is a place to practice, or rehearse, the practices of political participation rather than to engage in the practices of political participation.

Let me offer one detailed example. Bruce McComiskey’s *Teaching Writing as a Social Process* gets students closer to being really politically active than any other cultural studies pedagogy I know of. McComiskey argues that writing is a form of cultural production; as such, it operates within the cycle of production, distribution and consumption that describes neo-Marxist theories of cultural work. Along with situating writing this way (along a “cultural

plane,” so to speak), he situates it within a theory of textuality that accounts for language’s functions, structures and implications in much more detail than the language theories of other cultural studies pedagogists, who leave the surface features of writing largely out of the picture. Interestingly, McComiskey declares early in the book that, although the cultural and textual planes intersect at an almost infinite number of possible locations, he’s attending specifically to the first-year writing classroom (5-17). However, because he works from Stuart Hall’s notion that language-in-use is a product of complex cultural influences, he avoids reducing the languages that students write to strictly “academic writing.”

This move plays out in interesting ways in the assignments he makes, especially when he asks students to write advocacy letters to people who can solve problems they raise in their critical work. (Describe the units—each one centers on an issue—work for example—and students do a critical piece and then an advocacy piece, which they may or may not distribute to whoever its ostensible audience is). Whereas (at least as far as we know) other cultural studies teachers don’t ask students to advocate any kind of social action beyond critique, McComiskey requires his students to use those critiques to advance solutions. Those solutions call on students to formulate texts for circulation outside the classroom, which is an important move.

Well, almost. As much as I appreciate the ways that McComiskey elaborates theoretical grounds from which student writing engages social and political issues more directly than Berlin, in the end, I’m not sure that he dissolves the boundary between classroom and larger cultures that runs through all the cultural studies pedagogies. For McComiskey, the glitch results from his argument that, in the name of participatory democracy, he can’t force students to distribute their advocacy texts to the people they write them for. In order to be consistent with his own politics, there’s no legitimate way to require students to participate in democratic processes. But

this claim puts him in a difficult position; rather than rethinking what it is he's asking students to do, he explains that, in the case of students who don't want to present their texts to non-classroom audiences, he tries to emulate the reading he thinks the texts would get. In other words, he risks subverting whatever value he might have gained by having students extend their texts outside the classroom by reinscribing the classroom boundaries firmly. This choice not to require making public what are written as ostensibly public documents positions McComiskey's work alongside others' in its demarcation of classroom cultures as something other than the public spaces they want to *prepare* students to operate in.

Let me try to crystallize the problem. While cultural studies pedagogies certainly establish and depend on much more sophisticated conceptions of the social than their predecessors, they still construct students who are detached from the social milieus that the pedagogies invoke. By treating students as junior members of democratic society rather than as members who already have and use some agency, cultural studies classrooms tend to reinforce the exact inequities they're ostensibly designed to subvert.

Ethnography as a Grassroots Organizing Principle

So let me take my last few minutes to describe a writing course that I believe operates according to the kinds of democratic principles that I think cultural studies means to get at but doesn't. There are two dimensions I want to focus on: student-teacher relations; and writing practices that reflect and refract those relations. What I'm proposing is a course structured as an ethnographic site (which you can pursue more or less formally depending on what you want to do with the "research"), and more specifically a course in which both students and the teacher engage in ethnographic writing practices. Drawing from socialist ethnography developed at some length in Dell Hymes' edited collection *Reinventing Anthropology*, students and I work to

construct the classroom as a site organized around writing and understanding writing's social implications. The classroom thus becomes a site where power isn't necessarily equally distributed among participants at all times, but instead a protean site where ever-changing distributions of power enable, at least over the long-term, every participant to participate in developing pedagogy, curriculum, goals, and practices that constitute the writing course.

The contributors to *Reinventing Anthropology* present less of a program for ways to do ethnography than some ways of seeing ethnography as a positive force for democracy. Their disagreements over the best kinds of relationships for researchers and participants to enter into; the extent to which ethnographic research needs to assimilate itself to other kinds of academic research endeavors; the extent to which the practices of ethnography are tied to the discipline of anthropology; and so on reflect the instability of power-relations in classrooms and offer a variety of ways to understand and reconstitute them. From this perspective, the practices that students and I bring to the classroom as participants in a common inquiry continually constitute and reconstitute the power relations among us as the interests, agendas, talents, and circumstances of individuals and groups of participants move into and out of the foreground. As anthropologist Robert Jay says of his own fieldwork:

In future field work I shall place first a mutual responsibility to my whole self and to those I go to learn from, in agreement with my desire to relate to them as full equals, personal and intellectual. I shall try to use my relationships with them to find out what topics are relevant to each of us, to be investigated through what questions and what modes of questioning, and for what kinds of knowledge. I should wish to make the first report for them, in fact with them; indeed it may be that written reports would seem to us redundant. (379)

Jay makes two important moves in this passage. First, he describes a relationship that is strongly collaborative, rather than a critical relationship or a reciprocal relationship that other contributors

advocate (445). Second, as Jay's last sentence indicates, the result of this kind of collaborative relationship may well be that the ethnographer never writes up or publishes the results of her work outside the site (which should be good news for us as teachers with already insanely over-committed schedules!). Education researcher Ernest Stringer describes his approach, which he calls qualitative action research (and we can talk about the distinctions between "ethnography" and "action research" during Q&A), and claims a similar trajectory for fieldwork:

Action research is based on the assumption that the mere recording of events and formulation of explanations by uninvolved researchers is inadequate in and of itself. A further assumption is that those who have previously been designated as 'subjects' should participate directly in research processes and that those processes should be applied in ways that benefit all participants directly. Community-based action research is a derivative of this approach to inquiry. (7)

What does a classroom emerging from this kind of collaborative model look like? With the time I have left, I can only begin to sketch it out. (Put up overhead and talk it).

Concluding thoughts:

1. Notice how different this is from the cultural studies course I described earlier— whereas McComiskey establishes the themes and the assignments for each unit of his course, in an ethnography-based course all assignments and practices are developed collaboratively. When I say collaboratively, that doesn't necessarily mean that we all have to reach consensus on what everybody's going to be doing at a given time either; one reason I ask students to do ethnographic writing is that there's no hope of keeping everybody on a consistent schedule anyway, which paradoxically makes it easier for the students to assert agency over their work.
2. I don't mean to suggest that I have no power in the classroom; of course I do. I have grade power; I have the opening foray in which I claim that the whole idea of the

course is worth doing; before the course even starts, I've likely thought a whole lot harder about what's going to happen during the semester than the students have; I have more experience than they do as a researcher; etc. The students also have a great deal of power: they choose whether or how much to negotiate their positions in the site; they provide the vast majority of the material we work with in the course; etc. Rather than claiming, then, that the course is "teacher-centered" or "student-centered," the centers of power shift according to whatever contingencies are in play at a given moment—how well their work is going, what kinds of moods we're all in, our interpersonal relationships, the kind of classroom we're in... an almost infinite list of possible factors. The classroom therefore becomes an actual site of actual democratic, collaborative, grassroots organization, a site where all participants get to put into practice and reflect on power and agency, circulated in talk and writing.

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